

VZCZCXRO0855
PP RUEHAO RUEHCD RUEHFL RUEHGA RUEHGD RUEHHA RUEHHO RUEHKW RUEHLA
RUEHMC RUEHNG RUEHNL RUEHQU RUEHRD RUEHRG RUEHRS RUEHSR RUEHTM RUEHVC
DE RUEHROV #0070/01 1221354
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 021354Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0310
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0338

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000070

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/WE LARREA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 5/2/2031
TAGS: [KIRF PHUM SOCI VE VT](#)
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ COMING TO VATICAN; PRIEST'S DEATH RAISES EYEBROWS

REF: A) MARTIN - LARREA EMAILS

VATICAN 00000070 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

11. (C) Holy See MFA Country Director for Venezuela Thevenin confirmed that President Chavez would visit the pope and secretary of state, most likely May 11. Thevenin said there

SIPDIS
might well be a press statement on the margins of the meetings at which time the Holy See would have an opportunity to make some mention of its concerns about Chavez. Although Venezuelan Cardinal Castillo Lara likely pressed the pope on Chavez during a private audience this week, Thevenin could not guarantee how the Benedict would eventually decide to handle the dictator. Thevenin suspected government involvement or manipulation in the recent murder of Fr. Jorge Pinango (ref a). Fr. Pedro Freites, rector of the Venezuelan College in Rome and vocal opponent of Chavez, was even more emphatic that people connected to the government were involved in the murder. End Summary.

Chavez to Visit

12. (C) Holy See MFA Country Director for Venezuela Nicolas Thevenin confirmed April 28 that President Hugo Chavez would visit Pope Benedict XVI and Secretary of State Angelo Sodano, most likely May 11. As reported previously, there was never any doubt that the pope would receive Chavez if the head of state sought a meeting.

13. (C) We emphasized the danger of Chavez exploiting the visit, and expressed the hope that the pope or Sodano would make public mention of Chavez's anti-democratic and other harmful actions. Thevenin needed no convincing; he said there might well be a press statement on the margins of the meetings at which time the Holy See would have an opportunity to make some mention of its concerns. "We need to be a little tough here," he said, though he hinted that he could not be sure his suggestions would be heeded.

Castillo Lara with Pope

14. (C) Thevenin thought it was good timing that Cardinal Castillo Lara had seen the pope this week in a private audience, surely pushing Benedict to take a stand with Chavez. Thevenin could not guarantee how the pope would eventually decide to handle the dictator, but said that "everybody here thinks that Castillo Lara is right" about Chavez. The issue, as Thevenin and others have told us before, is how the cardinal goes about making his points. The Vatican finds his modus operandi unproductive.

Murdered Priest

15. (C) Turning to the recent murder of Fr. Jorge Pinango (ref a) in Venezuela, Thevenin said he would not rule out government involvement. "The timing of this incident, and several of the details are very strange," he said. Thevenin thought the murder could well have been a message from the government to warn priests tempted to speak out against the regime. "I don't know much about [Pinango's] political views," Thevenin admitted, but he could have been a target in any case. Thevenin said that the sordid details of the case might also be fabrications meant to discredit the Church. At the very least, he insisted, the investigators should not be speaking to the press in the middle of an investigation.

16. (C) Fr. Pedro Freites, rector of the Venezuelan College in Rome and an outspoken Chavez critic (septel), was even more emphatic that people connected to the government had committed the murder and wanted to make it appear to be the work of thieves or a tryst gone wrong. He said the murder was likely connected to consistent government intimidation of the Church and efforts to discredit it. Freites claimed he had spoken recently to Castillo Lara, who told him that "what they did to Pinango they had been thinking of doing to you."

Comment

VATICAN 00000070 002.2 OF 002

17. (C) Septel will describe a recent conversation with Freites on the general situation in Venezuela. As he is a hard-core detractor of Chavez, it is unclear how much stock one should put in his theories on the murder. Combined with the concerns of Thevenin, however, the suspicions seem worthy of note.
ROONEY